

Newspaper: Providence Journal
Date: July 5, 2007
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Council ratifies union contract

The three-year agreement with Local 1363 of the International Association of Fire Fighters requires that its members start paying part of the cost of their health coverage.

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CRANSTON — After working without a contract for a year, the city's firefighters have a new three-year deal.

The pact, which the City Council approved on an 8-1 vote Tuesday night, calls for 2 percent raises every six months, starting Jan. 1, and for the first time requires firefighters to pay for a portion of their health care coverage.

Aides to Democratic Mayor Michael T. Napolitano, whose administration negotiated the contract with the firefighters union, said the amicable settlement was a sign of an improving climate at City Hall after four years under the mayor's combative Republican predecessor, Stephen P. Laffey.

"I think it shows a new day in Cranston,

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where level heads prevail, rather than go to court on every issue," said Ernest J. Carlucci, Napolitano's director of administration.

But critics, who argue the contract is overly generous to firefighters, say the mayor should have been tougher in negotiations.

"I would dispute anyone who says when everyone's holding hands and singing 'Kumbaya,' it's good for the taxpayers," said David Exter, chairman of the Republican City Committee.

The Laffey administration and firefighters battled over everything from pensions to sick leave. And last year, contract negotiations between the two sides broke down. But the change in administration rekindled talks, and word of an agreement surfaced last month.

Paul Valletta, Jr., president of Local 1363, International Association of Fire Fighters, said the

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union had two priorities.

First, negotiators pressed to improve benefits for the families of firefighters killed in the line of duty. Under the old contract, the city paid for health care insurance for a deceased firefighter's family until the date of his normal retirement.

The new contract keeps benefits in place until a widow remarries or dies and dependent children reach age 21.

Valletta also pushed for a clause that declares cancer a job-related ailment worthy of disability benefits. Union and administration officials say the provision echoes a state law that requires benefits for firefighters who get cancer on the job.

But Republicans say there is one crucial difference: state law requires establishing a link between the cancer and exposure to smoke, fire or other harmful substances, while the contract does not — meaning a desk employee with skin cancer could claim benefits.

"The city's got to have some type of causal element,"

said former Councilman Allan Fung, a Republican who narrowly lost to Napolitano in the race for mayor last year and showed up at the City Council meeting Tuesday night to criticize the contract.

Union officials have replied that no firefighters are hoping to get cancer just so they can collect disability checks.

Critics also argue that firefighters, who will pay \$520 per year for an individual health care plan or \$1,040 for a family plan, are not contributing enough for insurance.

Aram G. Garabedian, the City Council president, cited that concern in casting the lone dissenting vote on the contract Tuesday night.

But Carlucci, the mayor's di-

rector of administration, said the contribution would be the second-highest of any fire department in the state.

Napolitano, in remarks to the City Council Tuesday, said there was another financial benefit to reaching a deal. The union, he noted, requested arbitration after talks broke down last year. And avoiding arbitration, which can be costly, saved the city substantial sums, he said.

The mayor also hailed a separate, one-year retroactive deal covering the July 2006-July 2007 period that firefighters worked without a contract.

That pact includes no pay increases or improvements in benefits.

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